

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
**DEPARTMENTAL MANUAL**

Museum Property Handbook  
(411 DM, Volume I)

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Chapter 4 Introduction to Museum Property Preservation

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**A. INTRODUCTION**

The survival of a museum property collection and its continued use in exhibits, research, and public service depends on a bureau's long-term commitment to preserving its objects. In the museum field, the technology of preserving collections is called conservation. The primary goal of object conservation is to preserve objects and specimens in as stable a state as possible to prolong its life. In the Department of the Interior, object conservation is an ongoing process of preventive conservation supplemented by conservation treatment when necessary.

1. Preventive Conservation

The goal of preventive conservation is to prevent harm to an object or specimen before it occurs. When a ceramic vase crashes to the floor because its exhibit mount fails or because it is dropped through carelessness, the process of preventive conservation has failed. However, preventive conservation is not only about avoiding accidents. Deterioration also occurs slowly over decades. Each incident of wear may hardly be noticeable, but the gradual accumulation finally becomes serious deterioration. Preventive conservation is necessary to retard or prevent serious deterioration of objects and specimens.

A preventive conservation program for museum property also ensures the preservation of the information or information-containing residues that are within, on, or associated with the object(s) and/or specimens. Proper maintenance of this material should ensure the capability of relating an object or specimen to associated information in the future.

A program of preventive conservation includes maintenance of museum objects and specimens and their associated information in a stable environment and ensures proper handling, storage, environmental conditions, and exhibit techniques to reduce the rate of deterioration to a minimum. A preventive conservation program minimizes the need for conservation treatment. It is an approach to

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museum collections management that emphasizes a long-term, ongoing program for the preservation of museum property.

2. Conservation Treatment

Conservation treatment is necessary when:

- # preventive conservation measures are not enough to reduce the rate of deterioration to a tolerable level
- # deterioration has proceeded to a point where the object or specimen is extremely fragile and is in danger under any circumstances
- # needed for exhibit or research

The use of the word "conservation" (and "conservator") reflects a changing emphasis in the treatment of museum objects. In the past, "restorers" worked to renew the appearance of objects and specimens, and often, the retention and preservation of original or historically important elements was not a high priority. Today, the preservation aspects of conservation treatment receive increasing attention. Often, "conservators" devise treatments primarily to stabilize the condition of museum objects and specimens. There may be little or no "restoration." The word "restoration" refers, specifically, to efforts to return an object or specimen, as nearly as possible, to its original appearance, or to its appearance in a particular historic period, by removing accretions, subsequent additions, and by replacing missing elements.

All treatments should be kept to a minimum to reduce the possibility of compromising the archeological, historic, scientific, or aesthetic integrity of objects and/or specimens. Emphasis should be placed on preserving the original materials and on minimizing restoration. For all conservation treatments, the Department adheres to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Refer to Appendix C for a copy of the AIC Code of Ethics.

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**B. ESTABLISHING A MUSEUM PROPERTY CONSERVATION PROGRAM**

1. Responsibility

Conservation of museum objects and specimens is a shared responsibility between curatorial staff and the conservator. Curatorial staff are responsible for the day to day management of the museum collection, including:

- # acquisition
- # record keeping
- # preventive conservation
- # interpretation
- # exhibits
- # research
- # publication

The conservator is trained and skilled in the theoretical and practical aspects of preventive conservation and of performing treatments necessary to preserve the historic, scientific, and aesthetic value of an object or specimen. Most conservators specialize in the treatment of a specific class of objects or specimens (e.g., paintings, furniture, books, paper, textiles, metals, ceramics and glass, photographs, archeological and ethnographic objects, or natural history specimens).

A cooperative relationship between curatorial staff and the conservator is crucial to the successful establishment of a museum property conservation program. Mutual understanding and respect for each other's role and responsibilities to the collection is essential. Curatorial staff should recognize that conservation treatments are the responsibility of a conservator or a trained conservation technician. Curatorial staff, unless properly trained in interventive conservation treatment techniques, should not attempt repairs or perform other interventive treatments on objects or specimens. Conservators should recognize that curatorial staff are ultimately responsible for making judgements

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about the care and management of museum property. The roles of the curatorial staff and the conservator are listed in Figure 4.1.

2. Curatorial Supplies and Equipment

A wide variety of forms and specialized supplies and equipment are needed for managing DOI museum property. Included are:

- # museum record keeping materials and forms
- # storage containers
- # specialty curatorial items (e.g., white cotton and latex gloves and polyethylene drawer liners)
- # natural history supplies
- # museum cabinetry
- # shelving
- # racks
- # environmental monitoring and control apparatus

Addresses of vendors that specialize in commonly used museum property management supplies and equipment are provided in Appendix J.

3. Actions

The conservation of museum property requires a well-planned program that ensures the efficient use of funds and available staff time to provide appropriate, long-term care for museum objects and specimens. The program should include the following actions:

- # Document the collection as required by the Departmental Manual. Refer to the Museum Property Handbook, Volume II, Documentation of Museum Property, for guidance.
- # Conduct a self-evaluation to identify deficiencies. Use the DOI "Checklist for Preservation, Protection, and Documentation of Museum Property" included in Appendix E.
- # Establish a preventive conservation program.
- # If appropriate, assess the condition and preservation

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needs of the structure housing museum property.

- # Obtain the services of a conservator to conduct a Conservation Survey of the museum property collection.
- # Identify potential emergency threats to the museum collection and incorporate appropriate guidance in the appropriate emergency planning document.
- # Ensure that preservation of museum property is addressed

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**Preventive Conservation**

<u>Curatorial Staff</u>	<u>Conservator</u>
! Monitors and assesses condition of objects	! Assesses condition of objects; conducts Conservation Surveys.
! Monitors and evaluates museum environment	! Alerts staff to signs and causes of deterioration
! Practices proper methods and techniques for storing, exhibiting, handling, packing and shipping of objects	! Provides technical guidance on museum environment, storage, exhibits, handling, packing and shipping
! Develops and carries out an ongoing housekeeping/maintenance program for collection	! Assists in development of housekeeping/maintenance programs and in preparation of emergency management plans
! Prepares emergency management plan for museum collection	

**Conservation Treatment**

<u>Curatorial Staff</u>	<u>Conservator</u>
! Documents history, significance, value, and proposed use of each object to be treated	! Examines and documents conditions and problems of objects
! Develops and monitors contracts for conservation services	! Prepares treatment proposals for curatorial review and approval
! Assesses, in consultation with conservator, the suitability of written treatment proposals and authorizes treatments	! Performs suitable treatments
! Monitors progress of treatment for each object	! Documents treatments performed
! Ensures continuing care for treated objects	! Recommends methods for the future maintenance and care of treated objects

**Figure 4.1. Curatorial Staff and Conservator Roles in Conservation of Museum Property (This chart originally appeared in the NPS Museum Handbook, Part I (Rev. 9/90), Chapter 3.)**

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in the Collection Management Plan. Refer to Chapter 2 for guidance.

- # Ensure that curatorial staff have received training in preservation and care of museum property.

**C. THE CONSERVATION SURVEY**

1. Purpose and Content

The Conservation Survey is a report on the status of object and specimen conservation in a unit's museum collection. For example, a conservator may be requested to survey a unit's collection of historic photographs to determine treatment needs and record baseline data for the future assessment of deterioration. In another instance, a conservator might examine an exhibit to evaluate the displayed objects and specimens for signs of deterioration and to evaluate the mounts, lighting, and case design and construction.

A survey is conducted by a conservator specializing in the treatment of the particular objects or specimens to be surveyed (e.g., photographs, paintings, furniture, or textiles). The survey report may include recommendations pertaining to storage techniques, environmental conditions, pest control, or other related matters. Or, the emphasis of a survey report may be to provide information on the condition of individual objects and/or specimens in the collection.

Over a period of time a unit may need several different surveys by one or more conservators, depending on the kinds of objects and/or specimens in the collection, the collection size, and the unit's programs and priorities. Often, the first survey to be completed may focus on general conditions in exhibit and storage areas. Subsequent surveys focus on the condition of individual objects or specimens within broader classes (e.g., ceramics, textiles, or biological specimens). Surveys should address special problems and needs. It is important that guidelines for a survey be determined and

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clearly communicated to the conservator(s), so that the unit obtains a useful report.

In many cases, curatorial staff need assistance in establishing conservation treatment priorities. A Conservation Survey conducted by a professional conservator can provide the specialized direction and advice to improve care of the museum property.

2. Steps in the Survey Process

a. Request for the Survey

Ensure that a statement on the need for surveys by conservators is included in the Collection Management Plan. A survey may be acquired by purchasing the service. Work with the Contracting Officer on procuring this survey.

b. Selection of the Conservator(s)

The Conservation Survey Report is based on information gathered by a conservator or a team of conservators during a site visit. The size of a team depends on the number and size of specific classes of objects and/or specimens to be examined at one time. Conservators conducting a survey need to be specialists in the treatment of the specific class of objects and/or specimens being examined (e.g., furniture, textiles, metals, paper, books, paintings, ethnographic objects, or natural history specimens).

c. Preparation for the Site Visit

- 1) Determine, as precisely as possible, the number of individual objects and/or specimens to be examined in each class of objects and convey this information to the conservator(s).
- 2) Furnish the conservator with basic catalog information on each object and/or specimen to be

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examined (e.g., catalog numbers and object and/or specimen descriptions) do not include accession information or valuations.

- 3) Furnish the conservator with information about prior surveys and/or copies of prior treatment reports of objects and/or specimens to be examined.
  - 4) Establish with the conservator the number of days needed for the survey. Surveys can be extremely time-consuming.
  - 5) Plan the logistics of the survey. Determine the location where objects and/or specimens are to be examined. Assess security needs. Determine work space needs of the conservator (e.g., a table with adequate lighting). Identify any equipment requirements (e.g., photographic equipment, ladders, and hand tools).
  - 6) Inform the conservator of the conditions of the spaces housing the museum property to be examined (e.g., facility deficiencies and levels of temperature, relative humidity, and light).
  - 7) Provide general information to the conservator (e.g., unit brochure).
- d. The Site Visit

The assistance of the curatorial staff is essential to the success of the survey and report. The curatorial staff should be able to accompany the conservators to provide information about access to and security for the museum property to be examined. Before starting the examination, the conservator(s) should be familiar with the collections, with the facility, and the conditions in the storage and exhibit areas. The site visit is an especially valuable time for the conservator(s) to answer questions about conservation practices. At the beginning or at the end of the visit, the

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conservator(s) and curatorial staff should meet to discuss preliminary results of the survey.

e. Preparation and Review of the Survey Report

There is no standard format for a Conservation Survey. Each report should contain a narrative introduction that provides general information about the site visit (e.g., site name, visit dates, and the names of the conservator[s]) and explains all technical terms. This introduction also may include general recommendations. Either a narrative or checklist format can be used to report the present condition of each object or specimen. Use catalog numbers to refer to the objects surveyed.

The detail in a report varies according to the purpose of the survey. A report on the examination of museum property should clearly indicate the object and/or specimen type, description, recommended treatment, and whether treatment is urgently needed.

Conservation Surveys may include treatment proposals for the curatorial staff's information and guidance in preparing specifications for conservation treatment. However, these surveys are not intended to provide treatment proposals for other conservators to follow or use. The conservator selected to perform the actual treatment will want to examine an object or objects thoroughly before submitting a treatment proposal for review and approval. Surveys do provide information for the guidance of curatorial staff in setting priorities for treatment, budgeting, scheduling, and communicating with conservators concerning treatments.

Once the Conservation Survey is complete the curatorial staff should review the document immediately. Discuss any questions regarding the report with the conservator(s).

f. Using a Conservation Survey Report

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A survey and the resulting report are a key step in a museum property conservation program. The conservation treatment of objects should begin only when the curatorial staff has identified the importance of each object or specimen, and its present and anticipated long-term use. The survey report documents the condition of the objects and specimens examined and sets priorities for treatment based solely on the physical condition and risk of each. The curatorial staff's responsibility is to evaluate the treatment needs in terms of museum property priorities (e.g., for interpretive and research programs) and enact recommended changes in storage and exhibit conditions and techniques. Treatment should be performed by a conservator. Refer to Chapter 10 for instructions on obtaining and documenting conservation treatment.

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